

American University in Cairo

AUC Knowledge Fountain

Faculty Book Chapters

2002

Introduction (Elections in the Middle East)

Iman A. Hamdy

Follow this and additional works at: https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_book_chapters



Part of the [Near Eastern Languages and Societies Commons](#), and the [Political Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

APA Citation

Hamdy, I. A. (2002). *Introduction (Elections in the Middle East)*. American University in Cairo Press. , 1-10
https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_book_chapters/1019

MLA Citation

Hamdy, Iman A. *Introduction (Elections in the Middle East)*. American University in Cairo Press, 2002.pp. 1-10
https://fount.aucegypt.edu/faculty_book_chapters/1019

This Book Chapter is brought to you for free and open access by AUC Knowledge Fountain. It has been accepted for inclusion in Faculty Book Chapters by an authorized administrator of AUC Knowledge Fountain. For more information, please contact fountadmin@aucegypt.edu.

Elections in the Middle East

What Do They Mean?



Edited by
Iman A. Hamdy

Contributors

Assia Boutaleb	Curtis Francis Doebbler
Judith Harik	Maye Kassem
Mona Makram-Ebeid	Baskin Oran
Christopher Parker	Sami Zemni

INTRODUCTION

IMAN A. HAMDY

While elections is not a new phenomenon in the Middle East, it has acquired additional importance in the past decade as democratization became a universal appeal under the so-called New World Order dominated by the United States. Anoushiravan Ehteshami noted that during the 1990s "elections have become a common feature of political life" (Ehteshami 1999:204) in the region. "They have become so entrenched in the political landscape that they are now emerging as an important indicator for assessing overall development and progress in any given country" (ibid:204, 206). Starting 1989, and especially since 1992, each year has witnessed national elections of one sort or another in one or more countries in the Middle East, including those countries which had paid little attention to this practice in the preceding decades. Moreover, each country had more than one election during this decade, varying between "presidential, parliamentary and municipal elections" in addition to "national referenda and plebiscites" (ibid:206). One of the explanations given to this phenomenon attributes it to the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Soviet Union and the elimination of the communist threat brought on many western countries to give up their unequivocal support of repressive regimes which had been their allies during the Cold War and demand domestic reform in return for their continued economic and political support of these regimes (Niblock 1998:222). That went along with the wave of democratization and political liberalization which took place in Eastern Europe and Central Asia and was projected to spill over this part of the world.

Another major factor contributing to this phenomenon was related to the shift from state-planned to market-oriented economies due to the inability of the state in most of these countries to maintain its economic policies that tended to provide heavy subsidies for the less privileged classes. Burdened by exhaustive debts, these states had little choice but to submit to the conditions of international monetary donors and embark on structural adjustment programs. In doing so, they sought to accompany economic liberalization with a tinge of political liberalization in order to divert public

attention from the economic hardships resulting from these programs and meet up the expectations of foreign donors and investors (ibid). Christopher Parker's paper in this collection shows that Jordan is a good case in point.

Not all observers though agree that these elections constitute a positive indication of the spread of democracy in a region well seen by many as lacking "much previous democratic experience" and seems "to have little prospect of transition even to semi-democracy" (Deegan 1998:8). Thus, while some see that this phenomenon reflects a genuine irreversible change in the ruler-citizen relationship no matter how modest this change is, others see it only as a façade. They offer a list of socio-economic as well as cultural factors that impede democratic development in the Middle East—contrary to Africa and Asia—and argue that these factors are likely to dominate the future. Among these factors are adherence to Islam, the weakness of social classes, the dependence of the bourgeoisie on the state, and the prevalence of rentier economy (Niblock:223-24).

This monograph attempts to give a fresh insight into electoral politics in some Middle East countries. It is a collection of papers delivered at **Cairo Papers Tenth Annual Symposium** on "*Elections in the Middle East: What Do They Mean?*" held in May 2001. The papers cover cases from different sub-regions in the Middle East with the exception of the Gulf area: North Africa, the Nile Valley, and the Levant; dealing with republics and monarchies, authoritarian regimes and democracies, Arab and non-Arab states. Although they basically attempt to address the relationship between elections and democratization, they also deal with other crucial issues facing countries of the region, the most important of which are national reconciliation, political stability, and globalization.

Elections in Egypt: A Shift to Democracy?

In the year 2000, an important development took place in Egypt's electoral politics as the government—in abidance with a ruling by the Supreme Constitutional Court—decided to put the election process under the supervision of the judiciary rather than the Ministry of Interior as had been the case before. In what constituted a step toward political reform, this decision was praised by many as a guarantee of freer and fairer elections and,

thus, a means to decrease political apathy among the masses and encourage higher voter participation in elections.

On analyzing the results of these elections both Assia Boutaleb and Mona Makram-Ebeid agreed in their papers, "The Parliamentary Elections of Year 2000 in Egypt: A Lesson in Political Participation" and "Elections in Egypt: Rumblings for Change" respectively, that although the elections did not bring up new results, nevertheless, the process itself reflected signs of change, thanks to the new law stipulating judicial supervision of elections. Although the National Democratic Party (NDP) managed to gain the majority of seats as expected, "the will for change"—as Boutaleb called it—could also be sensed. First, these elections involved an education process for the public which showed more interest to vote than in previous elections despite the fact that they gave their votes to individuals rather than parties. Second, they witnessed a growing number of candidates and were marked by the spending of huge sums of money in the electoral campaign. As a result, a large number of businessmen was elected giving legitimacy to the claim that economic success was an accepted credential for election to politics. That contrasted with the humiliating performance of the NDP during these elections signified by the loss of some of its prominent faces. In addition, Mona Makram-Ebeid believed that these elections were the freest elections Egypt had in the past decade. Despite its flaws and the restrictions imposed by the Emergency Law on political activity in general, it had some positive indications that should not be overlooked. There was a larger voter turnout, an increase in the representation of minority groups—namely Copts and women—who managed to win people's votes, and a decline in the NDP representation in parliament. That last issue caused an inner revolution in the party that sought to rejuvenate itself by replacing the old guard responsible for this defeat with young fresh faces, a tactic that might have been manipulated by the government to ensure the presence of inexperienced parliamentarians who would be easy to control. Finally, the decline in the popularity of veteran NDP faces has two indications: first, that the public is yearning for change, and second that the party needs to be radically restructured to become more sensitive to people's mood. Unless change in this direction takes place within the coming years, the ruling party may end up losing ground in the future to the only other possible viable force—the Muslim Brotherhood.

Maye Kassem does not share this optimism. In her paper "The 2000 Elections: New Rules, New Tactics", she claimed that indeed the new ruling placing elections under judiciary supervision did enhance popular hopes for a better democracy in Egypt. However, these hopes were dashed as the government—afraid of losing its landslide majority in parliament especially for its own cabinet members—resorted to new tactics to rig elections. The most notable of all was the use of blatant violence against the masses in order to prevent them from casting their votes for their favorite candidates. Kassem argued that although the death toll in the 2000 elections was less than that of the 1995 elections, nevertheless, the difference between the two elections is worrisome: in 1995, electoral fatalities were caused by feuds among candidates, while in 2000 they were the result of state aggression against the voters. This in turn increased the political frustration and anger of the masses against the government, a sign that is liable to threaten political stability of the state in the future.

Elections in the Midst of Civil War: The Cases of Sudan and Algeria

Elections may be sought by rulers as an indication of democracy even in a country torn by civil war and by a highly repressive regime. That is what Curtis Doebbler argues in his paper on "Elections in Sudan" that covers its 2000 parliamentary and presidential elections. Doebbler placed these elections in the context of Sudan's post-independence political landscape especially under the present regime of Omar al-Beshir which came to power through a military coup in 1989. Seeking political legitimacy for his rule, al-Beshir instituted a new constitution that was submitted to public referendum in 1998, followed by a series of laws dealing with the establishment of political parties. Although these measures, together with the latest elections, were far from what could be seen as democratic reform and failed to incorporate the rebellious South in electing and being elected to the National Assembly, nonetheless, Doebbler does not lose hope. He suggested that the possibility for democratic transition was there and that one of the factors that could bring it about is the support the international community could provide for the empowerment of Sudan's civil society that may then lead the nation to real democracy.

National reconciliation was the main issue in the 1999 presidential elections of Algeria, another country torn by civil war. In "Bouteflika: A Badly Elected President Looking for Peace", Sami Zemni analyzed those elections which brought Bouteflika to power. They came as the product of a process of "formal democratization" that started by Liamine Zeroual, Algeria's president from 1994 to 1998. Zeroual managed to replace the one-party system with another based on multi-partyism, while creating a neo-patrimonial order that kept the old elite in power. Bouteflika, brought to office by a network of interests, sought to legitimize his rule by striking a cease-fire deal with the military wing of the Islamic Salvation Front and using it as the basis of a law for national reconciliation. That law, though approved in a national referendum in September 1999, was the making of Bouteflika and few of his aides and not the product of a national debate involving the various political factions of the country. On the other hand, Bouteflika formed the government from the ranks of his own allies and co-opted opposition who were more interested in keeping their posts rather than working for the national good. Monopolizing power and political decisions, this clique bypassed Algeria's formal institutions, the prime minister and the parliament. Eventually, this led to the resignation of Ahmed Benbitour from the premiership in August 2000, to be replaced by another of the president's right hand men. Not sharing Doebbler's positive attitude when he spoke of Sudan, Zemni sees in the Algerian case under Bouteflika's rule a return to authoritarianism, one that brings to mind the one-party system of the early decades of the country's independence, despite the formal shift of the system to economic liberalism and political plurality which brought new elements to power.

Political Stability: A Priority in Lebanon and Israel

While national reconciliation is a central issue for the enhancement of democracy in Sudan and Algeria, political stability is a major concern for the Lebanese and Israeli electorates. After almost 15 years of civil war, post-war Lebanon has given high priority to political stability, especially in light of the "threat" posed by dissident elements who oppose Syrian presence in the country and contest the legitimacy of the Lebanese government on this basis. In 1992, these elements decided to boycott elections in protest of the

Syrian role in Lebanon. Meanwhile, the government physically cracked down on the opposition during anti-Syrian demonstrations. Thus, in her article on "Democracy and/or Stability: The Lebanese Parliamentary Elections of 2000", Judith Harik addressed the question of the extent to which government's concern for stability and Syrian influence can lead to the manipulation of elections and undermine Lebanon's democracy, an allegation made by the opposition. In doing so, she analyzed the political, familial, and socio-economic background of members of the 2000 parliament and cabinet and compared them with previous post-war figures in order to determine the extent of Syrian involvement in these elections. This analysis revealed that elections in Lebanon still follow the traditional pre-war patron-client relationship which is dominated by a number of large families and political leaders with more or less the same percentage of member turnout as before. The Syrian factor was indeed present in 2000 albeit indirectly, leaving enough space for the Lebanese themselves to make their electoral choices. The Syrian position stemmed from the fact that a good number of Lebanese local leaders had vested interest in maintaining their close relationship with Syria. Meanwhile, the fact that the largely pro-Syrian 2000 parliament was democratically elected gave legitimacy to the cabinet that was formed in conformity with this position. Here it is important to note that in the post-war period, Lebanese cabinets have had to be fully in line with Syrian policies. That was the means through which Syria and the Lebanese political leadership sought to ensure stability, a top priority for the Lebanese rulers and ruled alike.

Ironically, "too much" concern for democracy can also be a destabilizing element under certain circumstances. Coalition governments in countries whose political system is based on proportional representation may find it difficult to complete their term especially at times of crisis because of the conflicting positions of the various political parties in the coalition. This has been the case with Israel since the death of Yitzhak Rabin in 1995. In eight years (1995-2003), the country has been ruled by six different governments, none of which was able to finish its term. In "Israel's 2001 Elections: Stability at Stake", Iman Hamdy looked at the prime ministerial election held during that year for the first and last time, linking it to the issue of electoral reform in Israel. Labor leader, Ehud Barak, was elected as prime minister in 1999 under the 1992 Law of Direct Election of the Prime

Minister, a law that was designed to minimize political fragmentation, enhance political stability, and spare the large parties the continuous blackmail of the smaller ones in return for their participation in the governing coalition. However, this law brought the reverse effect, as the number of parties represented in the Knesset grew, thus increasing political fragmentation. On forming his government, Barak established a broad coalition which he failed to maintain and had to resign after less than two years in office. Moreover, he lost the 2001 elections to Likud leader, Ariel Sharon, by 25%.

Seeking to enhance the political stability of his regime, Sharon formed a National Unity government of the Likud and the Labor. However, subsequent events showed that that government could not survive much longer than its predecessor and national elections were called for in January 2003. Meanwhile, the political crisis that accompanied the fall of Barak's government brought to the fore once more the issue of electoral reform and the Israeli Knesset decided to repeal the 1992 Law and return to the pure parliamentary system effective the next elections. As such, the 2003 elections were held according to the old system. Because the Likud scored higher votes than the Labor, it was Sharon who formed the government again, this time in coalition with right-wing parties. Hence, the failure of electoral reform brought things back to the way they had originally been. Yearning for political stability and effective government, the Israelis are still well aware of the defects of their electoral system, but they have yet to decide how to change it.

Globalization in Turkish and Jordanian Elections

In his "1999 Elections in Turkey: Nationalists and Globalization", Baskin Oran pointed out that results of national and municipal elections contradicted the predictions provided by political analysts. While the nationalist Democratic Left Party scored the highest number of votes as expected, the second most popular party was not the Islamist Virtue Party but the extreme-right National Action Party, a party that was expected not to obtain the minimum election threshold. On the other hand, Islamic and center parties lost a good percentage of the votes they were expected to win. Finally, although the Kurdish People's Democratic Party failed to pass the

national threshold for parliamentary representation, it ranked first in eleven provinces, mostly populated by Kurds, and also managed to capture the mayorship in the municipal elections of many of these provinces. These indicators highlight the fact that nationalism (whether Turkish or Kurdish) was the most dominant issue in these elections rather than the socio-economic problems of the country, an observation that Oran explained in light of the increasing “threat” of globalization that Turkey is facing and that these parties sought to resist by using nationalist jargon.

While nationalism had been the catchword in the 1999 elections, as Oran argued in his paper, honesty and integrity was the key to success in the national elections held three years later. These elections brought about a shocking defeat to the incumbent parties in parliament, almost all of which failed to pass the minimum election threshold. Being sick with decades of “economic mismanagement, repressive laws, and corrupt politicians” (*Economist*, November 9, 2002, p. 53), the Turkish people decided to get rid of the old guard and give their votes to a new party with an Islamist flavor—the Conservative Justice and Development Party (AKP). Promising no major change in policy, the party’s main appeal was for being “clean” and uncorrupt, a trait that enabled it to win the absolute majority in parliament for the first time for any Turkish party since late 1980s (*ibid*).

Finally, elections in Jordan reflect the means through which the regime sought to ensure its control over the Jordanian arena at a time of major economic and political change especially with regard to the implementation of structural adjustment policies in 1989 and the signing of Jordanian-Israeli peace treaty in 1994. Adopting a network-analysis approach, Christopher Parker in his paper entitled “Transformation without Transition: Electoral Politics, Network Ties, and the Persistence of the Shadow State in Jordan” argued that “the post-1989 formalization of the political field in Jordan—and elections in particular—have in fact played a crucial role in structuring the dynamics of authoritarian adaptation in the kingdom” in the age of globalization (p. 137). Analyzing the relationship between the major political actors in Jordan and the economic and political developments, he demonstrated how electoral politics have been used by King Abdallah to consolidate his position and maintain the centrality of his role in Jordanian public life. As such, the 2003 parliament is nothing but the political arena for networked centers of power made up of the king’s traditional and new

allies who use formal and informal channels to control the country's political and economic life. This elite has so far succeeded to dissipate the increasing economic and political frustration of the public, rule out the chances of real democratic reform, and insure the stability of their rule for the foreseeable future.

As we have seen in many of the previously mentioned cases, elections in themselves do not constitute sufficient guarantee of genuine democratic transformation. This, however, does not rule out the possibility that the election process may eventually enter the political arena as a variable that would trigger a more radical change toward democracy. Meanwhile, by focusing on elections, not only are we able to examine their relationship to democracy, but also acquire an insight into the political and social dynamics within the respective countries and the way they seek to confront the various challenges facing them. The countries discussed in this volume are part of a region in transition. How they will ultimately manage to overcome these challenges and settle on their future is yet to be revealed.

Works Cited

- Deegan, Heather. 1994. *The Middle East and Problems of Democracy*.
Boulder: Lynne Rienner Publishers.
- Ehteshami, Anoushiravan. 1999. "Is the Middle East Democratizing?,"
British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 26(2):199-217, November.
- "Erdogan Triumphs—With Plenty of Help from His Enemies," *Economist*,
Vol. 365, Issue 8298, Nov. 9, 2002, pp. 53-54.
- Niblock, Tim. 1998. "Democratization: A Theoretical and Practical Debate,"
British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies 25(2):221-33, November.